
The Historical Origins of Secessionist Movement in West Papua

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Abstract: *This article attempts to examine the historical origin of the secessionist movement in West Papua. It will be shown that the policy of the colonial rule—the Netherlands—not to transfer the disputed territory of West New Guinea to Indonesia, but to prepare for its independence during 1949—1961, had a deep consequence in the development of West Papuan nationalism and separatism. As a result, after the “transfer of authority” from UNTEA to Indonesia in 1963, the former colonial ruler had already planted a “time bomb” for the Indonesian authority: the seed of West Papuan nationalism. Its manifestation is the rise of West Papuan aspiration to separate from Indonesian rule and persistence of West Papuan armed resistance towards Indonesian “colonial” rule under the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM).*

Key Words: *The Netherlands, Indonesia, West Papuan Nationalism, Secessionism*

1. Introduction

West Papuan is the easternmost province of the Republic of Indonesia. After the downfall of “New Order” authoritarian regime in 1998, West Papuan activists began openly to call for independence from Indonesia. This article attempts to examine the historical origin of the secessionist movement in West Papua. It will be shown that the policy of the colonial rule—the Netherlands—not to transfer the disputed territory of West New Guinea to Indonesia, but to prepare for its independence during 1949—1961, had a deep consequence in the development of West Papuan nationalism and separatism.¹ As a result, after the “transfer of authority”

¹ This paper acknowledges that, even long before the Dutch efforts to de-colonize the territory, there had been already a seed of nationalism or proto-nationalism among the Melanesian population, which was reflected in the resistance to Japanese occupation

from UNTEA to Indonesia in 1963, the former colonial ruler had already planted a “time bomb” for the Indonesian authority: the seed of West Papuan nationalism. Its manifestation is the rise of West Papuan aspiration to separate from Indonesian rule and persistence of West Papuan armed resistance towards Indonesian “colonial” rule under the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM).

2. The Policies of the Netherlands

As in other colonial situations, the Dutch controlled a territory in the East Indies whose boundaries were arbitrarily defined: ethnically, culturally, and geographically. The Dutch territory comprised mainly Malay or Asian population. However, West New Guinea with its Melanesian population was also integrated under the Netherlands Indies in 1872 (Lijphart, 1966:23-24).

Two days after the defeat of Japan in the Pacific War, Indonesian nationalists unilaterally declared their independence. Understandably, before the declaration there was disagreement among nationalist leaders about the future boundaries of the independent nation, especially over the inclusion of West New Guinea (May, 1992:405). The first view (Mohamad Hatta’s) was that the new nation should have to some measure of cultural homogeneity. This view would have excluded the Melanesian population of West New Guinea, but, for the sake of consistency would have implied the absorption of the Malay population of the adjoining British Colonies.

The second view (Moh. Yamin’s, which was supported by Sukarno) was that the new nation should simply comprise the entire former Dutch colony (Sutter, 1979:14). According to this view, the Melanesian population of West New Guinea

(Savage, 82:4). However, this essay emphasizes that it was the Dutch policy not to transfer the territory to Indonesian authority but prepare to grant independence during 1949—1962 that was the main factor in creating a deep sense of West Papuan nationalism. The West Papuan historical experience differed from the Indonesian experience and constructed a sense of separate nationalism.

would be included within a predominantly Asian “Indonesia.” The second view prevailed. Consequently, the new nation later on claimed as its territory all of the former Dutch East Indies from Sabang, a small island in the northwestern tip of Sumatra, to Merauke, a city in the southeast of the West New Guinea.¹

The Dutch initially did not recognize Indonesia’s declaration of independence, but finally recognized it in the Hague Conference of 1949. But it was agreed that the status quo of West New Guinea would be maintained and would be negotiated the following year (Henderson, 1973:22). Pouver (1999: 166-7) points to several reasons for the policy of Dutch government not to transfer the territory to Indonesia. Firstly, domestic political considerations in the Netherlands played a part. Secondly, the Netherlands wanted to retain some measure of control in the Pacific and not lose its status as a colonial power completely. Thirdly, politically conscious Papuans from Biak-Numfor who occupied low-ranking position in the administrative and educational positions, and who had resisted the power of the *amberi* (non-Papuans), demanded the right to self-determination.

But Holland accepted the reality that the colonial days were ending. It decided to adopt policies of de-colonization for West New Guinea and planned to grant the Melanesian population independence by 1970—separately from the new nation of Indonesia. These very policies had a profound consequence for the political future of the territory; they sowed the seed of West Papuan nationalism.

During the decolonization period between 1945-1962, the Netherlands launched a crash program aimed at rapidly educating the West Papuan elite and embarked on

¹ Osborne (1985) and Whitaker (1990:24) notes that the original declaration of Indonesian independence describes the new state as stretching “from Sabang to the easternmost islands of Ambon. This description, they argue, omitted West Papua. This book believes that both are incorrect. The original declaration of independence, in fact, does not mention a clear description about the boundaries of the Indonesian State. It was because Sukarno’s view prevails in the debates that required continued inclusion of West Irian in the new nation (Sutter, 1987:14).

“Papuanization” of government jobs (May, 1990:160). Administrators, technicians, police and army received training and encouragement from the Dutch. The local elite was encouraged to think politically (Osborne, 1986:52). Various political parties were set up in the second half of the 1950s (Djopari, 1993:30-4). The Dutch also dampened the pro Indonesian sentiments among the Papuan educated elite (Osborne, 1986:53, Djopari, 1993: 35).

On April 1961, as part of the de-colonization process, a central representative body was successfully created, the New Guinea Council. Twenty-three of its twenty-eight members were Papuans, and sixteen of the twenty-eight members were elected, the remaining twelve being appointed. The Council had the rights of petition, initiative, interpellation, and joint legislation. The establishment of the Council, and other crash programs clearly worked as a catalyst on the rapidly growing political awareness (der Veur, 1963:72; Puower, 1999:168).

With popular support, the Council decided to adopt “Papua” as the official name for the native population and “Papua Barat” as the name of the country. They also designed their own flag, the Morning Star,” and composed their own national anthem, “Hai Tanahku Papua” (Hail, My Land Papua). On December 1st, 1961 the Council together with the Dutch colonial administration, officially inaugurated the Papuan national symbol, which emphasized their sovereignty as a people.

The Netherlands’ policy of creating an independent state of West Papua, however, was halted by Indonesians who claim to be the rightful heirs of all of the former Dutch East Indies. As a result of United States’ pressure and Indonesian military infiltration, the “New York Agreement” was reached in 1962, which stipulated that authority in West New Guinea would be transferred to the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) and, then, to the Indonesian authority. United Nations security forces were also to be replaced by Indonesian forces “after the first phase have been completed” (Henderson, 1973:210). It also stipulated that Indonesia was to make the necessary arrangement “to give the people of the territory the opportunity to exercise

“freedom of choice” by 1969 whether they wish to remain with Indonesia or to sever their ties with Indonesia (Henderson, 1973:211).

West Papuan nationalists were disappointed with the “New York Agreement” and felt betrayed (Sharp and Kaisiepo, 1994:60) because they were not involved in the negotiations and because the Dutch plan to grant independence was abandoned. After the controversial “Act of Free Choice”¹ in 1969, the UN General Assembly finally “took notes” (rather than “endorsed”) the outcome in a resolution 2504/XXIV, 19 November 1969 (Djonovich, 1975:213). It was adopted with 84 votes for, 30 abstentions, and no negative vote. There has been strong criticism of the incorporation (see for example, Osborne, 1986:46-7; Budiarto and Liong, 1988:11- 26; Whitakker, 1990:29-31, Rumakiek, 1996:24-9; Saltford, 1999; Blay, 2000; *Tapol Bulletin* 156, Jan/Feb 2000). The critiques are concerned not only with the unfairness of the conduct of the “Act of Free Choice,” but also with the New York Agreement of 1962, in which the West Papuan people were not consulted and treated only as “an object”.

West Papua thus formally became an Indonesian province and the UN Decolonization Committee removed it from the list of non self-governing territories. However, the Dutch’ decolonization policies has planted a “time bomb” for Indonesian government. As Van der Veur (1963:72) correctly observes, “the strongest arms left by the Dutch in the territory were not firearms but the Papuan flag.”

3. The Rise of Papuan Nationalism and the OPM

After the transfer of authority from UNTEA to Indonesia in 1963, Indonesian policy was to integrate West Papua militarily, politically, culturally and socially into the Indonesian nation. It initially concentrated on changing and

¹ The controversy of the “Act of Free Choice” is that the implementation did not conform with “international practice.” The numbers of person to take part in the Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat (Pepera) was only 1,025 person, accounting for a mere 0,8 per cent of the population of 800,000 people, handpicked by the Indonesian authority to secure victory, (*Pacific New Bulletin*. Vol. 15 No 3. March 2000).

consolidating the government structure and establishing its authority in the new province. The first action was to eliminate democratic institutions, which were regarded as “colonial” institutions. To legitimize these actions, Presidential Decree no. 8 and no. 11, 1963 were promulgated to place West Papua under political control, banning all political activities, denying rights and freedoms. Those decrees also granted unlimited power to the security forces to eliminate any opposition in the society. All political parties formed during the Dutch administration were abolished. At the same time, democratically elected Regional Councils including the New Guinea Council, were disbanded. The governor was appointed by and directly responsible to the president. The restructuring and consolidation continued after 1969 (Rumakiek, 1996:32).

In the context of this political restructuring and increasingly strict political and military control, armed resistance against “alien” Indonesian authority broke out in Manokwari and other cities of West Papua, under what was then called Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement, OPM). The emergence and persistence of military resistance toward Indonesia after the “re-integration” was a manifestation of the West Papuan nationalism, which posed security problems for Indonesian authority for five decades.

According to RG. Djopari (1993:101-5), the OPM emerged in West Papua with two main factions. The first faction, lead by Aser Demotekay, emerged in 1963 in Jayapura. Aser was a West Papuan nationalist who believed in moderate means to achieve West Papuan independence by cooperating with the Indonesian authority. He was later replaced by a younger man, Jacob Prai, who is much more radical than Aser. The second faction, led by Terianus Aronggear, was formed in Manokwari in 1964, mostly among former PVK members (the Papuan Battalion created by the Dutch administration) who were sacked by UNTEA in 1963. The Indonesian authority captured Aronggear after a secret plan to set up an independent State of West Papua was leaked. His faction, under Ferry Awom, started an armed rebellion against Indonesian rule (Djopari, 1993:104).

Since its emergence, the OPM have been engaged in “illegal” activities that challenge the Indonesian authority, such as a proclamation of independence of Provisional Republic of West Papua New Guinea in “Markas Victoria” by Seth Rumkorem in 1971, various “Morning Star” flag-raising ceremonies, armed attacks on Indonesian army and police posts, hostage-takings, and seeking international support. In every city, the OPM also disseminates information about the OPM goals.

The OPM continues their insurgent activities to the present time (Budiarjo and Liong, 1988:67-71; Djopari, 1993:109-26; Pigay, 2000:294:309).

The main aim of the movement is “to end of Indonesian occupation and the establishment of an independent state of West Papua” (Rumakiek, 1996:55). The OPM national motto is “One people, One Soul,” which is the ideal and guiding principle for West Papuan unity. This motto is very important because of continuing tribal rivalry in West Papua (McBeth, 1996:59) and, ironically, factional conflicts among OPM freedom fighters themselves (Savage, 1978; Osborne, 1986:56-9, Sjamsuddin, 1989:100-8).

To achieve its ideal, however, the OPM faces two main weaknesses: the first is lack of central leadership (Rumakiek, 1996:58-61). Especially after the conflict between Jacob Prai and Seth Rumkorem, OPM faces a problem of central leadership in their coordinated struggle against Indonesia. A number of attempts has been made to unite all overseas Papuans and to reconcile the two main factions, including a reconciliation in Port Villa between Rumkorem and Jacob Prai supervised by Prime Minister Barak Sope of Vanuatu.

The second problem is communication (Rumakiek, 1996: 61-62). As a clandestine movement, command between the Headquarters and regional leaders, and between national leaders to international representatives was difficult. Most of the OPM clandestine network is maintained by runners and communication is slow. Other weaknesses are the limited number of full-time fighters and reliance on traditional weaponry (Browne, 1998:22).

As against these weaknesses, the strength of OPM is the support and sympathy it received from many West Papuans who participate in OPM activities, disseminating of pamphlets, attending meetings, giving logistic support (food, medicine, funds, etc.) and also giving moral support (Djopari, 1993:130-1; Browne, 1998:22). To what extent the OPM is supported by the indigenous West Papuans is not known, but it has been estimated that 80 per cent of West Papuans would have preferred independence (the goal of the OPM) if given a genuine plebiscite in 1969 (Osborne, 1986:63). As a secessionist movement, the OPM has played an important role in maintaining the ideal and the hopes of all tribes and regions in West Papua in their efforts to establish an independence state (Rumakiek, 1996:49) despite strict political and military control by of Indonesia.

Although some activities have challenged the Indonesian authority openly, for instance, the proclamation of state of “West Melanesia” by Dr. Thomas Waggai in Mandala Sport Hall in Jayapura at 14 December 1988 (Aditjondro, 2000:27-29), most OPM activities have been underground and relatively limited. This is understandable given the very strict political and military grip that was maintained under the authoritarian regime of President Suharto. However, the collapse of New Order in 1998 abruptly the West Papuan resistance and secessionist movement.

4. OPM and the International Supports

The OPM aspiration to end the Indonesian rule and set up independence West Papuan State needs moral, logistical and diplomatic support from the international community. West Papuan nationalists have actively international support for their cause.¹ However, the dominant international norms are not favorable for secessionism. Specifically, the dominant

¹ According to Heraclides (1991:37), the activities of secessionist movement at the international level generally aimed at penetrating the international system by gaining external adherents, consolidating sympathizers; finding aid or otherwise securing the inflow of the fundamental goods of secession (funds, arms, sanctuary, access. et cetera); and seeking mediators and neutralizing or limiting the extent of third party support for the central government.

international norms are not favorable to secession. Specifically, secession does not conform to the rules of international legitimacy, those fundamental legal and political principles that govern the present interstate system and membership in that system. Highly unfavorable too are two other sets of norms: those relating to state formation and recognition, and those concerning non-intervention in the internal affairs of states (Heraclides, 1991: Chapter 2).

Apart from the small pacific states of Vanuatu, Nauru and Tuvalu, no states in the world question the legitimacy and Indonesian sovereignty over the territory following the incorporation of 1969. Even before the formal incorporation of West Papua, Indonesia's international position was very strong, as Sutherland aptly notes (Saltford, 2000:75)

“...I can not imagine the US, Japanese, Dutch, or Australian government putting at risk their economic and political relations with Indonesia on a matter of principle involving a relatively small number of primitive people”

After the “Act of Free Choice”, the international opinion in the United Nations did not change much. A British diplomat in New York summed up international opinion in July 1969 (Saltford, 2000:89):

Our strong impression is that the great majority of UN members want to see this question cleared out of the way with the minimum of fuss as soon as possible.. .The Arabs and the other Moslem states would certainly support Indonesia strongly. There is, moreover, general recognition, even according to the Dutch, on the part of moralistic Scandinavians, that there is no alternative to Indonesian rule. Finally, the secretariat, whose influence could be important, appear only anxious to get shot of the problem as quickly as possible...

West Papuans were betrayed, argue Budiarjo and Liong (1988:113), by the American, the Netherlands and Australian governments. Until the 1980s, no country in the world took up the cause of West Papua in the United Nations. In 1986, the pacific state of Vanuatu raised its voice for the first time at the UN General Assembly on West Papua's behalf, and since then, non-governmental organizations have spoken out

about West Papua in various human rights bodies. Support for West Papuan independence has been growing in the some countries of the South Pacific and continues to grow.

Despite the generally unsympathetic environment, West Papuan nationalists have been active seeking international support for their cause. After the transfer of authority, West Papuans nationalists found “moral” support in the Netherlands, mostly from churches and academic, initially centering in Delft and later in Nijmegen. In London, TAPOL, the British Campaign for the Defense of Political Prisoners and Human Rights in Indonesia provides sympathetic coverage of developments in West Papua through Tape! Bulletin. In Sweden, an office of the West Papuan government in-exile was established in Stockholm and later in Malmo, with support come from Swedish academics and the Social Democrat Party. In Africa, an office was opened in Senegal, run by Ben Tanggama, reflecting links established with the “Brazzaville Group” during the 1950s and 1960s and relying on shared “negritude” (May, 1991: 163-4).

As a neighboring country, Papua New Guinea has ambivalent feelings towards the West Papuan cause. Since its independence in 1975, PNG basically maintained the policies laid down by the former colonial administration: successive governments have acknowledged Indonesian sovereignty in West Papua; they attempt to deny the OPM access to the border area; they discourage movement across the border; and where residence visas have been granted to West Papuans, the visa holder must refrain from political activity directed against Indonesia (May, 1991:166, Djopari, 1993:138).

However, there has been an underlying tension between the public attitude and the private feeling of PNG leaders. Basically, there is a great deal of sympathy for the situation of their Melanesian brothers, particularly among churches, students groups, and in villages along the border. However, there has been little inclination to translate the sympathy into active support for a free West Papua. PNG see free West Papua as worthy but the government pragmatically has been concerned predominantly with maintaining a cordial relationship with Indonesia (May, 1991:168).

Since the capitulation to Indonesian demands in the 1960s, the policies of Australian governments have displayed no interest in the West Papuan cause, being far more concerned with avoiding any rift in relations with Indonesia. Currently, it is also very cautious to avoid further diplomatic tension with Jakarta after East Timor crisis. In 2000, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer officially states that Australia recognize Indonesia's territorial integrity and refuse to recognize West Papua attempts to separate from Indonesia (Naunaa, 2000:8). However, a more sympathetic attitude in Australia has existed outside government, among organizations of the Left, human rights groups, church groups, and NGOs (May, 1991:173-5).

With the development of the information technology and the Internet, the international moral support for West Papua also comes from various nongovernmental organizations, some academic community, human rights groups, church groups, the Greens and the Left through various information on the Internet or Websites. Although this is a significant development, it remains to be seen to what extent such support influences the international public opinion and governments' policies.

West Papuans activists are actively seeking support in the regional and international arena. On September 2000, a delegation from the Papuan Presidium traveled to New York for the UN General Assembly meeting. The Free West Papuan movement also attended the Pacific Forum in Kiribati in October 2000, and gained "Observer Status." However, so far, Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and recently, Guyana are the only governments in the world to formally support the free West Papua movement (Tapol Online 160, December 2000:1-2).

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